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ABSTRACT

Due to the frequent occurrences of violence in schools across America, one must wonder how a school and a community will cope in the face of a crisis. This paper examines the role of the school counselor in crisis intervention by having school counselors in Eastern Kentucky complete a survey concerning their competence in fulfilling this role. The study finds that school counselors do recognize the importance of their role in crisis intervention; however, everyone, not just the school counselor, plays an important role in the intervention process. Results show a great need for crisis intervention at this time, and indicate that training must not be limited to school counselors and administrators. Schools should prepare intervention plans that can effectively move the school and community back to a normal routine as soon as possible. Appendix A is the Counselor Questionnaire. (Contains 1 table and 12 references.) (Author/MKA)

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Crisis Intervention:
The Role of the School Counselor

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Abstract

Due to the frequent occurrences of violence in schools across America, one must wonder how a school and community will cope in the face of a crisis. This study examines the role of the school counselor in crisis intervention by having school counselors in Eastern Kentucky complete a survey concerning their competence in fulfilling this role. School counselors do recognize the importance of their role in crisis intervention. However, everyone, not just the school counselor, plays an important part in the intervention process. There is a great need for crisis intervention training at this time, and such training must not be limited to school counselors and administrators. Each school must be prepared with an intervention plan which will effectively move the school and community back to a normal routing as soon as possible.

Crisis Intervention:

The Role of the School Counselor

Due to the increase of violence in society, there have been a growing number of crisis situations occurring in schools across America. Such acts of violence are no longer limited to large cities like Chicago or New York; they have touched smaller towns such as Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas, and most recently, Littleton, Colorado. When a crisis hits a school, whether it is a hostage situation, natural disaster, or death of a student or faculty member, many lives are disrupted at once. Indeed, there is a growing need for the school counselor to intervene in helping students, teachers, and the community cope within a crisis, as well as, gain an understanding of how such violent acts can occur.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of the school counselor in crisis intervention, and determine if school counselors feel competent fulfilling this role. By examining the role of the school counselor in crisis intervention, steps can be taken to prepare school counselors in the intervention process. Such preparation can allow school counselors to feel more capable in their role, as well as, help the school and community cope, should they be faced with a crisis.

Historically, attempts for schools to prepare for a crisis have concentrated on evacuation procedures due to a natural disaster. However, today, most educators face challenges associated with shootings, kidnappings, and/or assaults on students or teachers. The chances of these acts occurring on school grounds have become a statistical probability in both rural and urban areas (Obiakor, 1997). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) surveyed more than 65,000 students and received the following disturbing responses: (a) 55% of students surveyed in grades 10-12 say they know weapons are in schools, (b) 79% say violence is often

caused by "stupid things," like bumping in to someone, (c) more than one-third surveyed, do not feel safe at school; and (d) a majority said they would learn more and be happier in general if they felt safe at school (Gullatt, 1994, p.104).

Obiakor (1997) presented data provided by the Children's Defense Fund, which also paints a very sad picture of America's children. That is, each day (a) 13 children die from guns, (b) 30 children are wounded from guns, (c) 202 children are arrested for drug offenses, (d) 307 children are arrested for crimes of violence, (e) 1,304 teenagers have babies, (f) 2,255 teenagers drop out of school, and (g) 5,703 teenagers are victims of violent crimes (p. 104). "Two key areas that make teaching increasingly difficult are dealing with the increasing occurrences of significant life tragedies, and mastering and using collaborative techniques to address multidimensional problems that confront students"(Obiakor, 1997 p.81).

Today, schools are being held more accountable for their involvement in crises. Because a school crisis has an immediate and lasting effect on the educational climate it should be dealt with urgently (Eden, 1996). Immediate intervention following a crisis may alleviate or lessen long-term effects (Errington, 1995).

A crisis intervention plan assumes a crisis not only presents dangers to the individual mental health of those involved, but also provides an opportunity for psychological growth and development (Kline, 1995). Crisis intervention requires timely and skillful support before future physical or emotional deterioration occurs. It offers an opportunity for change to those who are feeling overwhelmed by the current situation. It is a process to restore balance and reduce the effects of the crisis in the individual's life (Stevens, 1995). "Mismanaging a crisis can cause more lasting harm to those involved than the crisis itself" (Gullatt, 1996, p. 105). A crisis plan

can make a difference in how effective a school system can be in helping students and staff through a difficult situation (Errington, 1995).

It is important for schools to have in place prior commitments, resources, and routines to be implemented by trained individuals who are in closest contact with the individuals affected by the crisis (Hilgendorf, 1996). After shots are fired is no time to decide who will lead your school through a crisis. If a crisis plan is not in place, valuable time will be wasted while trying to decide what steps need to be taken (Armistead, 1996).

When schools plan how to respond to a tragedy, one of the first necessities is identifying staff who can help when "bad things" happen. Selecting the right members to serve on the crisis response team is necessary in helping the school deal with the crisis and get back to a normal routine as soon as possible (Dudley, 1995). The team should possess a wide variety of individuals who have skills and knowledge about the school and community. Level headed and responsible individuals who are committed to training in crisis intervention and grief recovery, and also willing to give time beyond the school day when necessary should be chosen for the team (Perea, 1997). The size of the team should be based on the administration structure of the school and on common sense (Gullatt, 1996).

Dudley (1995) feels the crisis response team should be representative of staff, kindergarten through 12th grade. Schools that develop their own crisis team think they can handle their own crisis. However, if a crisis hits a high school, then teachers who are on the team would be pulled from class to counsel students and substitutes would be hired. Thus, the high school students would not have their own teacher on a day when they need them most.

Gullatt (1996) believes the "in house" crisis team is a more effective plan. Because of the presence of outsiders in a school, no matter how well intended, this can be pursued as intrusive

and undermining the school personnel's desire to help students themselves. Obiakor (1997) agrees with the in house team, stating that intervention models that involve outsiders landing, taking over, and then departing after the crisis is over should be avoided. Kline (1995) also emphasizes a preference for individuals who are known by students and staff, and are familiar with the setting. A strong outcome predictor for a traumatized individual is "the ability of significant nurturing individuals to deal with the traumatic event" (p. 245). Such support can offer the traumatized individual an awareness of inner strength for having coped successfully with a crisis.

Members of the team may include individuals from the school district, school, and community. Possible members are the principal, veteran administrators, school board members, teachers, parents, special service personnel, counselors, school nurse, school psychologists, at-risk coordinators, ministers, police officers, physicians, mental health professionals, support staff and secretaries (Dudley, 1995; Gullatt, 1996; LaPointe, 1996; Perea, 1997). Sometimes forgotten, but important, are the secretary and the head custodian in a school. They have a different rapport with students and can offer a different perspective on the situation (LaPointe, 1996).

According to Dudley (1995), most people believe that counselors are the obvious choice to be on, or lead a crisis response team because of their unique training. Many counselors do make good team members because they are good listeners and understand the needs of students. They are indeed helpful in helping students and staff during a tragedy. However, many schools believe that a counselor's training automatically makes them a good team member. That may not be the case. Above all, crisis team members "must be interested in serving on the team, must have support of staff, must be team players, must maintain confidentiality, must be calm, and use

common sense during times of tragedy, and must be able to work effectively with all age levels" (p. 36). These criteria are applied to all that are being considered as crisis team members.

The following factors should be kept in mind when selecting staff to serve on the team: (a) involve school staff in making suggestions as to who should serve on the team; (b) ask questions like, "Who would be calm in the face of a tragedy?" and "Who on staff communicates well with other staff, students and community?"; (c) select staff who have a sincere desire to serve; (d) select staff who can respect sensitive information and maintain confidentiality; (e) select those who have trust and respect from others; and (f) remember educational training and background are not major criteria (p. 34).

Kline (1995) believes that the counselor, as a team member, is responsible for determining the extent and nature of counseling services needed due to the crisis, and should mobilize resources, if needed, in the aftermath of a crisis. The counselor also oversees training of all staff who will be providing counseling due to the crisis, and should also maintain ongoing liaisons with community resources.

Because the crisis team is made up of a variety of individuals, team members, as well as, school staff should participate in training in crisis intervention procedures and learn their responsibilities. Handouts should be provided including tips on how to talk with students about death and the grief process (Perea, 1997). Training should emphasize both group and individual preparedness. Monitoring school crisis plans, at least annually, will help ensure that the team is prepared for the aftermath of a crisis (Kline, 1995).

It has become extremely important for schools to make advance plans for dealing with crisis situations. A school that is prepared for a crisis is more likely to deal effectively with students and staff. An unprepared school is only asking for chaos. Intervention plans should be madeand

implemented by school districts so the response can be organized. A quick and planned intervention can reduce or eliminate some potentially negative consequences (Obiakor, 1997). Nye (1997) explains, "... schools must have well-designed crisis management plans and specified procedures that will provide direction and stability when the heart is too heavy and the mind too full of grief" (p. 47).

In this study, the school counselor's role in crisis intervention was determined by surveying information from high school counselors, in eastern Kentucky, about their role in crisis intervention in their school. It was speculated that because of the school counselors training and background, the counselor would play a significant role in preparing and maintaining a crisis plan.

Method

Participants

The population of this study is high school guidance counselors in eastern Kentucky. The following counties were included in the study: Bath, Boyd, Breathitt, Carter, Elliott, Estil, Floyd, Greenup, Harlan, Jackson, Knott, Leslie, Letcher, Magoffin, Martin, Mason, Menifee, Montgomery, Morgan, Perry, Pike, Powell, and Rowan. Questionnaires were completed by five male and thirty female counselors whose experience ranged from two to twenty-five years. Attempts were made to contact at least twelve other counselors.

Materials

A phone questionnaire was used containing 10 questions concerning the school counselor's role in crisis intervention (see Appendix A).

Procedure

High school counselors from each county were contacted by phone to complete a

questionnaire containing questions concerning crisis intervention. Counselors were informed about the study, and asked to participate by answering the phone questionnaire. It took approximately five minutes to complete each questionnaire. They were informed that their responses would be kept anonymous.

Results

A total of thirty-five questionnaires were completed for the study (see Table 1). The results indicate that the majority of counselors feel comfortable counseling students in a crisis situation, with only 3 indicating they would feel uncomfortable. Two counselors, who answered "yes," said it depended on the situation at hand, four felt they needed more training in crisis intervention. All counselors, except one, said they felt they played an important role in crisis intervention in their school.

The majority of counselors have had to counsel students due to a crisis situation. Only three counselors said they have not dealt with a crisis in their school. Twenty-three counselors called in other school counselors in the area, social workers, or clergy to help their school during a crisis. One counselor indicated that the crisis occurred during her first year as a counselor and she was told by a supervisor to call in other counselors to help handle the situation. Four answered that it was part of their crisis plan to call in other counselors. The remaining counselors explained that there are many students needing counseling and there are usually only one to two counselors on hand. They explained that you can not put an individual's feelings on hold when experiencing a crisis, therefore other counselors and ministers were called in for assistance. One counselor answered that she might not call in other counselors to help her students should her school experience another crisis. She explained that she would like to handle

"her school, her way." Eight of the counselors did not call in anyone to help during the crisis, while three have not experienced a crisis in their school.

All of the counselors felt that teachers and administrators should attend training in crisis intervention. One counselor suggested training in crisis prevention.

Crisis intervention training has been completed by twenty-five of the counselors. Ten counselors have had no training. However, two of the ten were scheduled for training in October 1998, after this survey was completed.

A crisis intervention seminar has been offered to 26 of the respondents. Nine have not been offered an intervention seminar. Thirty-two of the counselors would like to attend a crisis intervention seminar. Two of which would only attend if the seminar were located near their school district. Three counselors were not interested in attending a seminar.

A crisis intervention plan is currently in place at 27 schools. Two schools have plans in progress. Six counselors indicated that their school has no plan.

A district crisis response plan is in place in 25 of the counselors' districts. Seven counselors said their district has no plan, while three counselors indicated that their district is in the process of developing a crisis intervention plan.

Ten of the counselors said they were in charge of the crisis intervention plan in their school. Twenty counselors said they are not in charge of the plan, while five gave no answer. When asked who is in charge of the plan, if not them: (a) 12 indicated the principal, (b) six, the assistant principal, (c) one, the Youth Service Center director, (d) one, the Site-Based Council.

When asked who makes up the crisis intervention team, answers varied. The following team members, along with the frequency of responses for each, were listed by the counselors: (a) counselor (27), (b) principal (23), (c) teachers, (14), (d) assistant principal, (10), (e) Youth

Service Center (YSC) coordinator, (9); (f) parent volunteer, (5); (g) clergy, (4); (h) supervisor from central office, (3); (i) emergency personnel, (3); (j) community member, (3); (k) school psychologist, (2); (l) director of transportation, social worker, health teacher, nurse, athletic director, and/or students, (1).

Discussion

By examining the role of the school counselor in crisis intervention, it appears that high school counselors in eastern Kentucky are aware that they have an important role in establishing and maintaining an intervention plan for their school. The counselors also recognize the need for schools to have a crisis intervention plan in place. Perhaps by participating in this study, counselors will reevaluate and come to recognize whether their school is truly prepared to deal with the effects of a crisis.

There is a great need for training in crisis intervention at this time, and such training must not be limited to school counselors and administrators. The school counselor does not have the sole responsibility of leading a school through a crisis. Everyone plays an important role in the intervention process. Training should be offered to the entire school personnel, possibly even to select students and community members. For, as LaPointe (1996) points out, having a variety of individuals on a team, who have a different rapport with students and staff, may offer a different perspective of the situation.

The majority of counselors interviewed have attended a crisis intervention seminar and would like to complete more training in the intervention process. Whether their school has a plan in place or not, the counselors are fully aware of the needs of their students. While all of the schools have "in house" crisis teams, the counselors understand that when crisis hits their school,

their students' needs are the first priority, and any outside resource that may be needed to benefit students will be contacted.

Indeed, in a time when violence is so widespread across all of America, our schools must take action to protect students from the damaging effects of a crisis. It can not be predetermined who will be affected by a crisis, or when or where a crisis may unfold. Whether the crisis affects the whole school and community or a portion of the student body, resources must be on hand and a crisis intervention plan must be in place.

The issue of being prepared to deal with a crisis in schools will be difficult to resolve because there is no perfect plan, as each crisis is different. In each situation, different individuals with different personalities will be met. A school must hope to have a well developed plan, level headed individuals, and teamwork to carry out the crisis intervention plan and effectively move the school and community through the crisis and back to a normal routine as soon as possible.

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Table 1
Counselor Questionnaire Percent of Responses

Question	Percentage of Respondents YES	NO	NA
1. Would you feel comfortable counseling students in a crisis situation?	87%	9%	4%
2. Do you feel you play an important role in crisis intervention in your school?	97%	3%	___
3. Have you had to counsel students due to a crisis situation?	91%	9%	___
4. If you have experienced a crisis in your school, have you called in outside resources to help with the situation?	67%	24%	9%
5. Do you feel administrators and teachers should attend training in crisis intervention?	97%	3%	___
6. Have you completed crisis intervention training?	74%	26%	___
7. Has a crisis intervention seminar ever been offered to you?	76%	24%	___
8. Would you like to attend a crisis intervention seminar?	92%	8%	___
9. Is there a crisis intervention plan in place at your school?	72%	28%	___
Is there a plan in place in your district?	74%	26%	___
10. Are you the person in charge of the crisis intervention plan in your school?	35%	59%	6%

Appendix A

COUNSELOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Circle one: MALE FEMALE

1. How many years have you been a counselor? _____

2. Would you feel comfortable counseling students in a crisis situation?
___YES ___NO

3. Do you feel you play an important role in crisis intervention in your school?
___YES ___NO

4. Have you had to counsel students due to a crisis situation?
___YES ___NO

5. If you have experienced a crisis in your school, have you called in outside resources to help? students cope with the situation?
___YES ___NO

If yes, please explain why you called in outside resources.

6. Do you feel administrators and teachers should attend training in crisis intervention?
___YES ___NO

7. Have you completed crisis intervention training?
___YES ___NO

8. Has a crisis intervention seminar ever been offered to you?
___YES ___NO

9. Would you like to attend a crisis intervention seminar?
___YES ___NO

10. Is there a crisis intervention plan in place at your school?
___YES ___NO

Is there a plan in place in your district?
___YES ___NO

11. Are you the person in charge of the crisis intervention plan at your school?
___YES ___NO ___NA

Who is on the intervention team at your school? Who is the leader of the team?